

Q: Good afternoon. Today is April 5th, 2016. My name is Sally and I'm here today at the Senior Center with Judge Paul A. Chernoff. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. What is your connection to Newton?

A: Well, I've been living in Newton for about 45 years. I moved here after I went to Law School and worked as a public defender in Washington. I then came to Massachusetts and moved to Newton and I've been here ever since.

Q: Okay. What were you doing before you entered the service?

A: Before I entered the service I was an undergraduate student at Tufts University in Medfield. I had studied mechanical engineering. I had taken ROTC for a period at the university. And my employment up to that time was waiting on tables in summers.

Q: Had you finished college before you entered the service?

A: Yes. I finished college and went through a 90 day Officer Training program at the Naval Operation Base in Norfolk, Virginia.

Q: How did you join and why did you choose that specific branch?

A: When I graduated from college I had three choices, at least in my mind I had three choices. I could go work as an engineer in the defense industry, and I had a couple of job offers. I could go into the Peace Corps, which was just starting and was very exciting to me. Or I could go into the service and have an opportunity to travel to many, many places over a period of time. And being a New Englander who hadn't traveled very much I decided to go into the service. I decided to go into a service where I could use my engineering, and at that time there were seven services, some

of them were interconnected, and I joined what was known then as the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, which is a Naval Engineering Service where a person serves on ships for almost all of their time and they go through an Officer Training program and you have Naval ranks and Naval uniforms. And so that was, so I chose that as my career. I was not drafted. I joined.

Q: Okay. How did you adapt to military life, including the physical regimen, barracks, food, and social life?

A: Well, it was easy for me. The training in ROTC certainly put me in a mode where the military and uniforms were certainly common enough to me, so that was kind of easy. And in the summertime when I worked at the resorts as a waiter we lived in barrack conditions which were very, very similar to what it's like on a ship and also what it's like on land when you're in the service. So I found that transition rather easy.

Q: How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

A: Well, I come from a rather insular family in Connecticut. They are very close and they would meet. My parents and aunts and uncles and my grandparents would get together every single Friday night of the year and that was my opportunity to try to communicate with the whole family. And so I went to a RadioShack and I bought a little tape recorder, and it was a reel to reel tape, and I would send them, regardless where I was, in the mail a spool of tape, recording tape. And I had purchased one of these recording devices for them too. You could listen and record on it. And I would send them a 10 or 15 minute tape every week and they would send one back to me. Sometimes it took two weeks in the mail and when I was on a ship it might take a month to get to me, but we did it mainly through this device.

Q: Well, that's very cool. Where exactly did you serve?

A: I started off going through Officer Training School, which was about a 90 day program. In fact in those days they called us 90 Day Wonders, because you entered as a complete civilian and you ended up after 90 days wearing a gold bar, mine was the bar Ensign, if you were in the Army you would be a Lieutenant, you would be a-- I don't know what you would be.

__: Private?

A: Private? No, not a Private. You would be an Officer, but you were, but at least in the Naval services I was an Ensign with one bar. So, in 90 days they were calling you Sir, and so that's why they called us 90 Day Wonders, because we were Officers. So, after my 90 days training at the Naval Operations Base and on the ship Explorer we came into port and then the members of the class, I think there were eight, I think there were eight in our class of Junior Officers, we were sent to different places in the country, and I was sent to Seattle. So I drove from Norfolk, Virginia to Seattle to my first opportunity to really serve on a ship.

But I thought the arrival was very interesting, arrival into the service, because it was a whole new world for me. As I said, I believe there were eight people in my Officer Training program, and in the service they're very conscious with your seniority, and the way they did it in the Naval service whoever arrived first ranked whoever arrived second, and they ranked the person who arrived third. I arrived first on that day. I got there before 8:00 in the morning, and then the other people arrived, but when we got put on the ship somebody shifted the list and it turned out I ended up at the bottom as far as rank was concerned. Now you would think that that wouldn't be important, but it is, because when you sit in the ward room and have your meals the lowest ranking person sits all the way down in the end of the table, so people who had come after me were ranking this way.

The other thing that was so interesting, when they give out rooms on the ship those who had the least seniority go towards the stern of the ship, and I was right next to the propeller, because I was the lowest ranking Officer. And so I slept, and right next to me was, they called it the screw, was the screw which would turn all night and go [noise]. And the other interesting thing is that after the first day you don't even hear it.

But to me I certainly forgive the service for the fact that somebody made a mistake and put me last rather than first in that group. That I can understand. That is a human mistake. But what I could never forgive them for, and I have great problems with government where they do everything on the basis of seniority, because, and that's what they did when I was in the service. So those six people that I ranked always got promoted ahead of me. When I was on an assignment and ever touched them in some job they always ranked me in that job, as I ranked other people. And I thought that is a very, very poor system, because by the time I was through I was ranking some people and some of them probably were better than I was at what I was doing.

So I've never liked that. I've always believed that seniority is important, but it's got to be mixed with factors of competency.

Q: Tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences.

A: Well, one of the most memorable is how I met my wife. I was, I drove out to Seattle and was on the ship Pathfinder at the, it was called the Naval Reserve Dock on Lake Union in Seattle, and there was the Captain of the ship was this aloof gentleman by the name of Arthur Bordwell, Captain Arthur Bordwell, and you never spoke to the Captain, all you would do is salute him in the morning. The Captain never ate in the ward room with everyone else. The Captain ate in his own cabin and he was aloof, and that's how it is in all of the services where there is a Ship Captain of a large ship.

And so there is a Naval tradition where Junior Officers, when you are in your home port, and Seattle was the home port for this ship Pathfinder, it is expected that the Junior Officers go out and pay a social call on the Captain of the ship. And so we were shaking in our boots, because we could hardly talk to him on the ship, and here we are expected to go out and pay a social call. It's usually done on the weekend. And what you do is you go out to the person's house and you pray that they're not home. You pray that you ring the bell and if there is no one there you leave your card, and that constitutes your visit.

So I went out, there was safety in numbers, I went out with at least half a dozen Junior Officers on this large ship, we went out on a Sunday afternoon. We were certain that the Captain and his family must have been at some shopping mall and that we would escape. And we got out there, we're wearing our uniforms, bang on the door, ring the bell, no answer. We were smiling to one another. We were taking out our cards. And just as we put them in the mailbox the door opens and there is Captain Bordwell, there is his wife Evelyn, and there is his daughter Lynn who was a sophomore or junior at the University of Washington.

Well, the ship went to, that summer went to Hawaii. In fact it spent a year in Hawaii and we were in and out of Pearl Harbor, and the Captain of the ship brought his wife and his daughter to Hawaii, and they spent the summer there while the ship was going in and out, and that's when I got to meet and really talk to and get to know his daughter, and we ended up getting married, and we have been married 50 years. So that is a memorable event, the first occasion.

The other one, the other event that is memorable, and I'm not, it's not a bad memory, but it's one that I sometimes can't get out of my mind, we were stationed in Hawaii and we were sent to Christmas Island, which is about a thousand miles south of Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean, because nearby to Christmas Island the military was going to drop the final hydrogen bomb for testing and we were sent out there in order to do a survey of the harbor so that other ships could come in and observe from a distance the dropping of the hydrogen bomb. So, we were out there for

several weeks and we worked in that area. And then we steamed back to Hawaii when our work was done. And I don't know how far away we were from the site of where the bomb was to be dropped. Probably pretty respectable distance, because as we were steaming back towards Hawaii late one afternoon we look out to the south and we can see what appears to be a mushroom cloud which must have been the last hydrogen bomb explosion by the United States.

And we all got certificates and I had this nice certificate, I put it on the wall. It had a mushroom cloud. And it says the United States Navy appreciates the work of Lieutenant Junior Grade Paul Chernoff, because I had gone from Lieutenant to Lieutenant Junior Grade to Lieutenant, but I was a Lieutenant Junior Grade at the time. And it said, "We congratulate you and thank you for your work on this important project." And I hung it up for a while and I would look at it and look at it. And it got so distasteful to me looking at it, it had a mushroom cloud, and thinking what it all means, that one day I just destroyed it. And I'll tell you, quite frankly, I regret it. I have grandchildren. It's a piece of history, not a great piece of history but it's a piece of history, and I wish I had held onto it, but I didn't do it.

So those are, that is another memorable event.

Q: Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events?

A: Yes. When I was in Hawaii at Pearl Harbor somebody came onboard, a high ranking military Officer who said, "We have a document," or at least a briefcase full of documents, "that have to be brought by courier service to an Air Force Base, Tachikawa, outside of Tokyo. And we need a volunteer who is willing to go to Japan and take this." So, I figured why not, so I did. And they handcuffed a satchel to my wrist and we flew to Wake Island, spent the night there. They gave me a pistol to wear, which I had no idea why on Earth, why anybody would want what is in this thing, but I went there, we spent the night. I remember standing outside the airplane, holding onto this thing through the night at Wake Island. And then we got back in the airplane, back to

Japan. At Tachikawa I turned over the documents to whomever was to receive those. And then I had two or three days in Tokyo, and I was staying at the Officers Club.

And so I was exhausted, hadn't taken a shower for two days, coming over from Pearl Harbor, and so I'm at the place where they billeted Officers at Tachikawa, and I go down to take a shower and I'm in the shower room, and there are no shower curtains there. So, I'm the only one there, I'm taking a shower, and all of a sudden in comes a number of female Japanese people who were coming in to clean the shower. And it was like I didn't exist. I mean they walked by me, they scrubbed the floor. Here I am, a prude by New England standards, there just absolutely petrified, and it was like I didn't exist. And I grabbed the towel, put it around myself, and essentially ran away. Another incident I never really forgot.

Q: Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: I do. My last series of duties was to survey airfields, military and some civilian airfields across the country, and I had just finished doing a, I was married at the time, we had been married just a couple of months, and I was in Cody, Wyoming, and that's when my time ended. I had an opportunity to extend, and I really was going to do it. I mean I loved being in the service. It was something that was just so good for me. And I had an opportunity to go to Flight School, which I had tried to do early on, but I needed at least three years' experience, and I had gotten notice that I could go to Flight School. And I said, "Well, now what I'm really interested in is Law School," because I had been admitted to Law School. And they said, "Well, you have to go back to sea for three more years and then we'll send you to Law School." And it was just too uncertain for me, because there might be, the command might change and the next person might say, "Forget it, you're not going to Law School."

So, I ended up resigning my commission, and as I told people I married the Captain's daughter, did the only honorable thing I could do, and that was to resign my commission, which is what I

did. And we went to Washington D.C. and my wife who had majored in Russian at the University of Washington translated Russian at the Library of Congress in Washington, and I went to Law School in Washington D.C.

So, when I left it was easy enough, we just drove across the country, but I was absolutely petrified going to Law School, because number one I had never taken a Pre-Law class in my life, when most of the people in the Law School class had majored in a Pre-Law setting in Undergraduate School. And secondly I hadn't been at school for almost four years, and I figured my chances of making it through Law School were not all that good. But it turned out that the service really matures you, really makes a human being out of you, and really sets you straight, number one, and number two that engineering turns out to be a very, very good preparation for the analytical thinking that a lawyer has to do. So, in fact I found engineering school very, very hard, and I found Law School very easy, so that was a very pleasant surprise.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: Well, I thought it was fine. I mean I was not very, very set in my ways. It was unusual not wearing the uniform all the time and it was unusual not being called Sir by everyone, although that was, although one of the things the service taught me was that being called Sir doesn't mean that you're up there, it means that somebody salutes you, they're saluting the bar on your shoulder or on your shirt, and if you really want to be respected you've got to earn their respect. And that is really something that the service taught me and that stood me well through life.

For example, you would never say, "I'm Ensign or I'm Lieutenant Junior Grade Chernoff or my name is Lieutenant Chernoff." That's not my name. My mother never named me Lieutenant Chernoff. I'm Paul Chernoff. I'm a Lieutenant. And that takes me all the way up to being the Judge. And that is just so important, the distinction. I would never say to anybody, "My name is Judge Paul Chernoff." I would never do that. I would say, "I'm Paul Chernoff. I'm a Judge in the

Superior Court” or whatever I do. And that is such a distinction and that is a distinction that I really learned when I was in the service is that you can’t rely on your rank and you can’t rely on what you’re being called.

And when I go to a funeral now one of the biggest decisions I make when I sign in, when they ask you to sign a memorial book at a synagogue or a church or when you go to a service is whether you put your rank, who you are, there. And my theory has always, my feeling has always been if you have to think about it then don’t put your title, if you have to think about it. So, for example, when a colleague of mine held the funeral service for his wife who died last year, very sad situation, when she died I remember going to the temple in Lexington, and I saw there were other people there who had put their names as Judge So-and-So, but I had to think about it, and if I had to think about it the rule is not to do it, so I just put, of course, Paul Chernoff. But a month later my legal secretary, her husband died, and when I went to that funeral and I signed that book there was no question, I put Judge Paul Chernoff, and I do that because their family ought to know that her husband had the standing that he would draw Judges to the funeral. So, I thought that was-- But the military taught me that. It’s something that has stood me well. You just don’t want people calling you out by your title. You should be known as yourself. So that is one of the things.

And the other thing the military taught me was how to, helped teach me how to get along with people in a lot of different stations in this world, people that don’t have the same education that I do, people who have more education than I do. I made it a point when I was on a ship to get to know all of the crew members, and so the military kind of taught me how you deal with people, and they taught me very well. Some of the Junior Officers after dinner time would sit in the ward room and play cards. I would go back to the stern of the ship where the crew members would gather and I would have them teach me how to tie nautical knots, because they could do that and they could do that much better than I could do, and they taught me. I can tie a bowline with my eyes closed now because of that experience. And the military really taught me how to do that and

that got me along very well with court officers in the courtroom, people who are in charge of security, and with the correctional officers at institutions when I served as Chairman of the Parole Board here, and this is all stuff, I think, that goes back to the military. And so they have affected my life all the way up to the present time.

The most recent thing that I have been doing in my “retirement years” is I spent time at the Veterans Hospital, Veterans Facility in Bedford, out by Hanscom Air Force Base, and I go there and I’m a part of the Veterans Legal Services and I counsel veterans on legal issues that they have. And what is so interesting, there is another Judge, a retired Judge who does the same thing that I do there, and of course the veterans very, very much appreciate our service, but I’m a veteran and the other fellow is, I’m a veteran and a retired Judge, the other fellow I work with is a retired Judge. The veterans that I am counseling never ever reach the point of my being a retired Judge. You’re a fellow veteran and that’s it. I immediately fit with absolutely everybody. We never reach the point that, “Oh gee, thank you, you’re a Judge and you’re helping me out.” It’s not that. It’s this being a veteran. I’m just so proud of doing that, and because I feel that I’m fitting in and it sort of is like bookends on what I’ve been doing.

Q: So, I think you just answered the next question. So, I’ll move on to the last one. What would you like people to know 100 years from now?

A: A hundred years is a long time. Maybe I can start with my grandchildren and then go on. I’ve written three books for my grandchildren. Two were published and one is coming out. In fact I have it with me. It’s at the printer right now. And they kind of memorialized a lot of things that have happened in my life as a Judge and when I was a public defender before I was a Judge, because I know with family, especially with family you get to know them in a loving, loving way, but you don’t get to know a whole lot about them.

My grandparents come from Russia and the Ukraine. They lived next door. My mother's parents lived next door to us in New Haven, Connecticut and my father's parents lived a couple of blocks away, which we thought was too far away, but it was about five blocks away. And I knew my grandparents my whole life, but I really didn't know them. My father's father was a milkman, delivered milk every day. My mother's father sold dry goods and he used to, when he lived in New York City sold dry goods from a pushcart. And they must have had wonderful, wonderful stories to tell. I never heard one of them. They were loving grandparents, but I didn't know them, and after they died I said, "I'm not going to leave my grandchildren that way. I'm going to write some things."

And so I started keeping a book 30 years ago, and any time something that happened that I thought my grandchildren might want to know, especially after I'm gone, I put in the book. So I've written three books. Each one is a little bit different. I was just going to give-- In fact the first book was just in a loose leaf form until my wife compelled me to get it printed. And so I think it's important to leave memories of who you are and what your response was to things and what you liked and what you disliked.

But I think sort of the bottom line of everything is that what you would like to be known as is somebody who did something for others in a lot of different forums and that you realized after a while, it took a while to do it, but you realized after a while that the person who does the good deeds is rewarded more than the person who receives the good deeds, and that is absolutely true. I see it in the Veterans Hospital every month when I'm out there and I see it in all of the other forums where I'm involved now. I do mediation work where I try to resolve disputes, and if you can do something to help somebody you're enriched more than they are. And boy it took me a long time to learn that, but I think a lot of that goes back to my service training.

Q: Okay, so it looks like we're just about done. Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish?

A: Well, I was very pleased to see that Newton has a program for veterans. I never knew it until a couple of years ago, and finally I got something in the mail from the Mayor, and I'm very glad of that. You should know that I have been on a quest to get identification as a veteran. Here you serve as a veteran and trying to get something official from the government that says that you're a veteran is almost impossible. I have something now from the Newton Center. I now have on my driver's license, it says veteran, because I brought in my discharge papers, and so they put veteran on that, so that is really the only official identification.

I went to the Veterans Service up in Vermont, because I figured they would be friendlier there than they would here, and they wouldn't give me a Veterans Identification Card. They said, "You make too much money to be eligible for any money from the Veterans Service, and number two you're in too good of health to need Veterans Assistance as far as somebody who needs medical services. And cards are too expensive. They're made in Tennessee." And I said, "Well, I'll pay for one. I'll pay double. Whatever it costs I'll pay. I just want a card."

And the reason why I wanted the card wasn't so I could display it to everybody, my wife and I went to visit an old friend of mine who was in the public defender service with me in Washington D.C. I came up to Massachusetts. He went to Hawaii where he has been teaching Evidence at the University of Hawaii Law School for 30 years or so. And we went up and visited him and his wife on the big island of Hawaii a couple of years ago, and he took us to this military reservation where you could go and stay for almost nothing, and it was a wonderful environment right near the volcano, and it was a wonderful, wonderful thing. I get there and they say to me, "Let me see your Veterans ID." I said, "I don't have one." And they took my word for it, but I said to myself, "How can that be that you serve your country and you can't even get a card?"

I understand they're going to change that now, but so I have sort of three forms of Veterans Identification, but I was just looking for just one official one.

Q: Okay. Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Well thank you. It's an honor.

END OF INTERVIEW